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**Tragedy of Greece:**



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# THE TRAGEDY OF GREECE

*A Lecture delivered for the Professor of  
Greek to Candidates for Honours in  
Literae Humaniores at Oxford  
in May 1920*

BY

A. J. TOYNBEE

Ipse Epicurus obit decurso lumine vitae,  
qui genus humanum ingenio superavit et omnis  
restinxit, stellas exortus ut aetherius sol.  
tu vero dubitabis et indignabere obire?

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## I

### *The Work of Art*

I BELIEVE that most of you who are attending this course of lectures have been studying Greek and Latin literature and are now going on to study Greek history.

I dare say many of you have been thinking over this change in your studies and perhaps looking forward to it, or regretting it, as the case may be. But this morning I want to draw your attention to the continuity between the literary studies on which you have been engaged, some of you for a considerable number of years—at school as well as at the University—and the historical studies on which you are embarking. After all, if names have any meaning, ‘*Litterae Graecae et Latinae*’ (the official title of Honour Moderations) and ‘*Litterae Humaniores*’ (the ‘Greats’ School) cannot really be alien to each other. The names imply that your studies in the local fields of Greek and Latin literature have equipped you for pursuing the same studies in the widest field of all—the field of humanity—and I believe that this is profoundly true.

Hitherto you have been studying a literature—that is, through the medium of language you have been studying creations of the spirit of man. Now, through the medium of this literature with which you have made yourselves familiar, you are going to study the greatest creation of the human spirit—a civilization.

Civilizations are the greatest and the rarest achievements of human society. Innumerable societies have been coming into being and perishing during many hundreds of thousands of years, and hardly any of them have created civilizations. One can count the civilizations on one's fingers. We have had perhaps three in Europe: the Minoan in the Aegean Islands (the dates 4000–1100 B. C. roughly cover its history); the Greek or Graeco-Roman round the coasts of the Mediterranean (its history extends between the eleventh century B. C. and the seventh century A. D.); and our modern western civilization round the coasts of the Atlantic, which began to emerge from twilight in the eighth century A. D. and is still in existence. Then there are the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Lower Mesopotamia, which were first dominated by Ancient Greece and then amalgamated into the single Middle Eastern civilization of Islam; and there are the civilizations of India and China. Even if we count as civilizations



the societies existing in Mexico and Peru before the Spanish Conquest, the total number of known independent civilizations, compared with the total number of known human societies, is very small. And it is so because the achievement is astonishingly difficult. There are two constant factors in social life—the spirit of man and its environment. Social life is the relation between them, and life only rises to the height of civilization when the spirit of man is the dominant partner in the relationship—when instead of being moulded by the environment (as it is in the tropical forests of Central Africa and Brazil), or simply holding its own against the environment in a kind of equilibrium (as it does on the steppes of Central Asia or Arabia, among the nomads), it moulds the environment to its own purpose, or ‘expresses’ itself by ‘impressing’ itself upon the world. Now you will see why I have suggested that the study of a civilization is not different in kind from the study of a literature. For in both cases you are studying a creation of the spirit of man, or, in more familiar terms, a work of art.

Civilization is a work of art—in essence, I believe, and not merely by a metaphor. You may say that works of art are made by individuals, civilization by a society. But what work of art can you think of in which the individual artist

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owes nothing to others? And a civilization, the work of countless individuals and many generations, differs, I believe, in this respect from a poem or a statue not in kind but only in degree. It is a social work of art, expressed in social action, like a ritual or a play. I cannot describe it better than by calling it a tragedy with a plot, and history is the plot of the tragedy of civilization.

Students of the drama, from Aristotle onwards, will tell you that nearly all the great tragedies in literature are expositions of quite a few fundamental plots. And I suspect that the great tragedies of history—that is, the great civilizations that have been created by the spirit of man—may all reveal the same plot, if we analyse them rightly. Each civilization—for instance, the civilization of Mediaeval and Modern Europe and again that of Ancient Greece—is probably a variant of a single theme. And to study the plot of civilization in a great exposition of it—like the Hellenic exposition or our own Western exposition—is surely the right goal of a humane education.

But of course one asks: Why study Ancient Hellenic civilization rather than ours? The study of any one civilization is so complex, it demands so many preliminary and subordinate studies—linguistic, institutional, economic, psychological—that it is likely to absorb all one's energies. The

greatest historians have generally confined themselves to the study of a single civilization, and the great Greek historians—Herodotus, Thucydides, and Polybius—concentrated on their own, and only studied others in so far as their own came into contact with them. Clearly, people who are going to be historians, not for life, but as an education for life, must make their choice. They must practically confine themselves to studying one civilization if they are to reap the fruits of study at all, and in this case it is natural to ask: Why study Hellenism rather than our own history? There are two obvious arguments in favour of studying modern history. It seems more familiar and it seems more useful. And I am not going to misrepresent these arguments by stating them only in their cruder forms. By ‘familiar’ I do not mean ‘easy’, and when I say that modern history seems more useful than ancient I do not mean that the study of it is a closer approximation to a Pelman course. There is an exceedingly crude view of education among some people just now—I think it is largely due to the war, and I hope it will disappear like other ugly effects of the war—which inclines to concentrate education on applied chemistry, say, or engineering, with a vague idea that people whose education has been devoted to these subjects will

be more capable of competing with foreigners in the dye industry or of working in munition factories in the next emergency. In the same way, I dare say, concentration on modern history might be supposed to fit you for securing concessions abroad for your firm, or for winning a parliamentary election. Of course, this attitude, though I believe it is rather widespread just now, is absurd. I need not labour that here. The fallacy lies in confusing the general theoretical knowledge of a subject acquired through being educated in it with the technical knowledge and personal experience which you must have if you are to turn the same subject to practical account in after life. There is no difference of opinion on this point between 'humanists' and 'scientists'. The issue is between people who do not appreciate the value of the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself, and those who do appreciate it and who therefore understand what education means. True lovers of knowledge and true believers in education will be found on the same side in this controversy, whether the subject of their study happens to be the spirit of man or the laws of its environment. But apart from that crude utilitarianism, which is as unscientific as it is un-humane, a serious argument for studying modern rather than ancient history can also be

stated from the humane and the scientific point of view. It may be argued that the direct experience we have of our own civilization makes it possible for us to have a deeper, and therefore a more humane and scientific, understanding of it than we can ever have of Ancient Greece. And one might go on to argue, on grounds of humanism alone, that such a comprehension of the character and origins of our civilization would have a more profound humanizing influence upon its development than a less intimate study of a different civilization could produce. This argument is bound, I think, to appeal to the generation which has experienced the war. The war is obviously one of the great crises of our civilization. It is like a conflagration lighting up the dim past and throwing it into perspective. The war makes it impossible for us to take our own history for granted. We are bound to inquire into the causes of such an astonishing catastrophe, and as soon as we do that we find ourselves inquiring into the evolution of Western Civilization since it emerged from the Dark Age. The shock of the Peloponnesian War gave just the same intellectual stimulus to Thucydides, and made him preface his history of that war with a critical analysis, brief but unsurpassed, of the origins of Hellenic civilization—the famous intro-

ductory chapters of Book I. May not these chapters point the road for us and counsel us to concentrate upon the study of our own history?

You see the question deserves very serious consideration, not merely from the utilitarian, but from the scientific and humane point of view. I am going to suggest in answer four points in favour of studying the civilization of Ancient Greece:

(i) In Greek history the plot of civilization has been worked out to its conclusion. We can sit as spectators through the whole play; we can say: 'This or that is the crisis; from this point onwards the end is inevitable; or if this actor had acted otherwise in those circumstances the issue would not have been the same.' We can grasp the structure of the tragedy and divide it into acts. But in our own history we are like players in the middle of the piece, and though we may be able to say 'This is the third act or the fourth act', we cannot say 'This is the last act or the last but one'. We cannot foretell the future; the work of art we are studying is incomplete, and therefore we cannot possibly apprehend it as an artistic whole, however vivid may be our experience of isolated scenes and situations.

(ii) My first point, then, in favour of Greek history is its completeness and its true perspective

from our point of view. My second is that the historical experience of the Greeks has been more finely expressed than ours. Its expression is in all Greek art and literature—for do not make the mistake of supposing that historical experience is expressed in so-called historical records alone. The great poets of Greece whom you have been studying hitherto will be of as much assistance to you in understanding the mental history of Greece (which is after all the essential element in any history) as the philosophers and historians whom you are going to study now. And Greek historical experience or mental history is better expressed in Greek literature than ours is in the literature of modern Europe. I am not attempting to compare the two literatures as literatures, but I do say with some confidence that the surviving masterpieces of Greek literature which you have been studying give you a better insight into the subjective side of Greek history—into the emotions and speculations which arose out of the vicissitudes of Greek society and were its most splendid creations—than any insight into the subjective side of modern history which you can obtain by studying it through modern literature.

(iii) My third point is expressed in the concluding phrase of Aristotle's definition of tragedy (*Poetics*, vi. 2). 'Tragedy', he says, 'is an imita-

tion of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude . . . through pity and fear effecting the proper *κάθαρσις*, or purgation, of these emotions.' (Butcher's translation.) This word *κάθαρσις*—purgation, purification, cleansing, discharge—has been the subject of interminable controversy among scholars, but I think any one acquainted with Ancient Greek literature who has lived through the war will understand what it means. Certainly I found, in the worst moments of the war, that passages from the classics—some line of Aeschylus or Lucretius or Virgil, or the sense of some speech in Thucydides, or the impression of some mood of bitterness or serenity in a dialogue of Plato—would come into my mind and give me relief. I felt that these men had travelled along the road on which our feet were set; that they had travelled it farther than we, travelled it to the end; and that the wisdom of greater experience and the poignancy of greater suffering than ours was expressed in the beauty of their words. Personally I got that relief from acquaintance with Greek civilization as expressed in Greek literature, and I got it because it put me in communication with a different civilization from our own—with people who had experienced all and more than we had experienced, and who were now at peace beyond the world of time and change.



(iv) *Κάθαρσις* seems to me the emotional value which is peculiar to the study of a different civilization, and which you cannot get, at any rate with the same intensity, by the study of your own. And this emotional value has its intellectual counterpart in the comparative method of study, which you get by studying, not your own circumstances, but circumstances comparable to, without being identical with, your own. This is a commonplace in the field of language. The study of Ancient Greek is generally admitted to have more educative value for an Englishman than the study of modern French or German, because Greek and English embody the fundamental principles of human language in entirely independent forms of expression, while French and English, in addition to the elements common to all language, share the special background of the Bible and the Classics, which have given them an extensive common stock of phraseology and imagery. This applies equally to the study of civilization. One learns more by studying Ancient Greek religion and comparing it with Christianity than by studying Christianity in ignorance of other religious phenomena; and one learns more about institutions by studying the Greek city-state and comparing it with the modern national state than by merely studying the evolution of the national state in modern Europe. If

we take utility to mean intellectual and not practical utility—and as humanists and scientists we do—we may claim without paradox that the study of Greek civilization is valuable just because it is not our own.

These, then, are my four points in favour of Greek history: we possess the whole tragedy, it is a magnificent expression of the plot, and it has a peculiar emotional and intellectual value which the drama in which we ourselves are actors cannot have for us.

In the remainder of the time at my disposal I propose to give a sketch of the plot of Greek history—every one must make his own sketch; I offer mine to provoke you to make yours—and I shall then try to illustrate my second point, the beauty of the expression, by quoting half a dozen passages from ancient authors. The other two points—the cathartic and the comparative value of Greek history—are matters of personal experience. I have little doubt that you will experience them yourselves in your studies during the next two years.

## II

*The Plot*

The genesis of Ancient Greek civilization is certainly later than the twelfth century B.C., when Minoan civilization, its predecessor, was still in process of dissolution; and the termination of Ancient Greek civilization must certainly be placed before the eighth century A.D., when modern Western civilization, its successor, had already come into being. Between these extreme points we cannot exactly date its beginning and end, but we can see that it covers a period of seventeen or eighteen centuries.

It is easier to divide the tragedy into acts. We can at once discern two dramatic crises—the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War and the foundation of the Roman Empire. We can for convenience take precise dates—431 B.C. and 31 B.C.—and group the action into three acts or phases, one before, one between, and one after these critical moments.

I will give you my analysis in tabular form:

*Act I* (11th cent.—431 B.C.).

1. Synoikismos (formation of the city-state, the cell of Greek society), 11th cent.—750 B.C.

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2. Colonization (propagation of the city-state round the Mediterranean), 750-600 B.C.
3. Economic revolution (change from extensive to intensive growth), 600-500 B.C.
4. Confederation (repulse of Oriental universal empire and creation of an inter-state federation, the Delian League), 500-431 B.C.

### *Act II* (431 B.C.-31 B.C.).

1. The Greek wars (failure of inter-state federation), 431-355 B.C.
2. The Oriental wars (the superman, conquest of the East, struggle for the spoils, barbarian invasion), 355-272 B.C.
3. The first rally (change of scale and fresh experiments in federation—Seleucid Asia, Roman Italy, Aetolian and Achaean ‘United States’), 272-218 B.C.
4. The Roman wars (destruction of four great powers by one; devastation of the Mediterranean world), 218-146 B.C.
5. The class wars (capitalism, bolshevism, Napoleonism), 146-31 B.C.

### *Act III* (31 B.C.-7th cent. A.D.).

1. The second rally (final experiment in federation—compromise between city-state autonomy and capitalistic centralization), 31 B.C.-A.D. 180.

2. The first dissolution (external front broken by tribesmen, internal by Christianity), A.D. 180-284 .
3. The final rally (Constantine τὸν δῆμον προσεταιρίζει—tribesmen on to the land, bishops into the bureaucracy), A.D. 284-378.
4. The final dissolution (break of tradition) A.D. 378-7th cent.

This analysis is and must be subjective. Every one has to make his own, just as every one has to apprehend for himself the form of a work of art. But however you may analyse the plot and group it into acts, I want to insist that the action is continuous, and that the first emergence of the Greek city-state in the Aegean and the last traces of municipal self-government in the Roman Empire are phases in the history of a single civilization. This civilization as a whole is the subject of your historical studies in *Literae Humaniores*; I may remind you that in your final schools one paper out of three is allotted to the general field of 'Ancient History'; but there is a danger of the unity of your studies being obscured by the perhaps undue concentration of the 'Greats' course upon two 'special periods', isolated from each other chronologically, and entitled respectively

a special period of 'Greek' and a special period of 'Roman' history. I want to warn you against being misled by this division. Your studies of Greek and Latin literature have no doubt convinced you that the difference of language there is less significant than the unity of form, and that you are really dealing with one literature, the Hellenic, which in many of its branches was imitated and propagated in the Latin language, just as it was to a lesser extent in Hebrew, or later on in Syriac and Arabic, in certain branches such as theology and science. I wish to suggest to you that the unity is even more apparent when, instead of confining our attention to literature, we regard the whole field of civilization. You cannot really draw a distinction between Greek history and Roman history. At most you can say that at some point Greek history enters on a phase which it may be convenient to distinguish verbally by connecting it with the name of Rome. Take the case of the Roman Empire—you may possibly have been surprised that I have taken the Roman Empire as the third act in the tragedy of Greece; yet when you study the Empire you find that it was essentially a Greek institution. Institutionally it was at bottom a federation of city-states, a solution of the political problem with which Greek society had been wrestling since the fifth

century, B. C. And even the non-municipal element, the centralized bureaucratic organization which Augustus spread like a fine, almost impalpable net to hold his federation of municipalities together, was largely a fruit of Greek administrative experience. As papyrology reveals the administrative system of the Ptolemaic Dynasty—the Greek successors of Alexander who preceded the Caesars in the government of Egypt—we are learning that even those institutions of the Empire which have been regarded as most un-Greek may have been borrowed through a Greek intermediary. Imperial jurisprudence, again, interpreted Roman municipal law into the law of a civilization by reading into it the principles of Greek moral philosophy. And Greek, not Latin, was still the language in which most of the greatest literature of the Imperial period was written. I need only mention works which are still widely read and which have influenced our own civilization—Plutarch's *Lives*, Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, and the New Testament. They are all written in Greek, and who will venture to assert that the age in which they were written falls outside Greek history, or that the social experience which produced them was not an act in the tragedy of Hellenic civilization? Even statistically the Empire was more Greek than anything else.

Probably a considerable majority of its inhabitants spoke Greek as a lingua franca, if not as their mother-tongue. Nearly all the great industrial and commercial centres were in the Greek or Hellenized provinces. Possibly, during the first two centuries of the Empire, more Greek was spoken than Latin by the proletariat of Rome itself. The Greek core of the Roman Empire played the part of Western Europe in the modern world. The Latinized provinces were thinly populated, backward, and only superficially initiated into the fraternity of civilization. Latinized Spain and Africa were the South America, Latinized Gaul and Britain the Russia of the Ancient Greek world. The pulse of the Empire was driven by a Greek heart, and it beat comparatively feebly in the non-Greek extremities.

### III

#### *The Expression*

And now that I have explained my reading of the plot, I will let the actors speak for themselves. I can only quote half a dozen passages, but I have chosen them to illustrate the critical scenes and situations in the drama as I have sketched it out,



and I hope they will convince you that there is something to be said for my interpretation.

I shall not dwell on the period I have called the first act—that is, the period before 431 B. C. But I recommend you, again, not to lay aside your poets when you take up your historians. Homer will reveal to you more of the opening scenes than Herodotus; and the exaltation of spirit produced by the repulse of the Persians, and expressed institutionally in the foundation of the Delian League, can hardly be realized emotionally without the poetry of Aeschylus. But the philosophers and scientists are indispensable too. Read Professor Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy*, or his *Greek Philosophy from Thales to Plato*, for your history as well as for your theory of knowledge. And read the little work on 'Atmospheres, Waters, and Localities' emanating from the Hippokratean school of medicine. It is only thirty-eight pages in the Teubner text (*Hippocratis Opera*, vol. i), and you will find in it a clearer expression than in Herodotus of the fifth-century scientific point of view. I will quote you one passage which might have been written in Victorian England. The writer is describing a peculiar disease prevalent among the nomads of southern Russia. 'The natives', he remarks, 'believe that this disease is sent by God, and they reverence and worship its

victims, in fear of being stricken by it themselves. I too am quite ready to admit that these phenomena are caused by God, but I take the same view about all phenomena and hold that no single phenomenon is more or less divine in origin than any other. All are uniform and all may be divine, but each phenomenon obeys a law, and natural law knows no exceptions.'

It is hard to leave this first act of the tragedy. It is a triumph of youth, and the phrase in which Herodotus sums up the early history of Sparta expresses the prevailing spirit of early Hellenic civilization. *'Ανά τε ἔδραμον καὶ εὐθενήθησαν*: 'They shot up and throve.' But there is another phrase in Herodotus which announces the second act—an ominous phrase which came so natural to him that one may notice about a dozen instances of it in his history. *"Εδει γὰρ τῷ δεῖνα γενέσθαι κακῶς*: 'Evil had to befall so-and-so, and therefore'—the story of a catastrophe follows in each case. The thought behind the phrase is expressed in Solon's words to Croesus (Herodotus, Bk. I, ch. 32): 'Croesus, I know that God is ever envious and disordering' (*ταραχῶδες*), 'and you ask me about the destiny of man!'

Note the epithet I have translated 'disordering'; we shall meet the word *ταραχή* again. It is the bitter phrase of a man who lived on from the

great age into the war, but not so bitter as the truth which the writer could not bring himself wholly to express. 'No single phenomenon', as contemporary Greek science realized, 'is more or less divine than any other', and the 'envious and disordering' power, which wrecked Greek civilization, was not an external force, but the very spirit of man by which that civilization had been created. There is a puzzling line in Homer which is applied once or twice to features in a landscape—for instance, to a river: 'The gods call it Xanthos, mankind Skamandros.' So we might say of the downfall of Greece: the Greeks attributed it to the malignity of God, but the divine oracles gave a different answer.

Why did the Confederacy of Delos break down and Greece lose her youth in a ruinous war? Because of the evil in the hearts of men—the envy aroused by the political and commercial greatness of Athens in the governing classes of Sparta and Corinth; and the covetousness aroused by sudden greatness in the Athenians, tempting their statesmen to degrade the presidency of a free confederacy into a dominion of Athens over Greece, and tempting the Athenian proletariat, and the proletariat in the confederate states, to misuse democracy for the exploitation of the rich by the poor. Envy and covetousness begat injustice,

and injustice disloyalty. The city-states, in their rivalry for dominion or their resentment against the domineering of one state over another, forgot their loyalty to the common weal of Greece and fought each other for empire or liberty. And the wealthy and well-born citizens forgot their loyalty to the city in their blind, rancorous feud against the proletariat that was stripping them of property and power, and betrayed their community to foreign enemies.

‘Strange how mortals blame the gods. They say that evil is our handiwork, when in truth they bring their sufferings on themselves. By their own folly they force the hand of fate. See, now, how Aigisthos forced it in taking the wedded wife of Atreides and slaying her lord when he returned, yet he had sheer destruction before his eyes, for we ourselves had forewarned him not to slay the king nor wed his wife, or vengeance would come by Atreides’ son Orestes, whene’er he should grow to manhood and long for his home. So spake our messenger, but he did not soften the heart of Aigisthos, though he wished him well, and now Aigisthos has paid in full’ (*Odyssey*, a 32-43).

These lines from the first canto of the *Odyssey* were imagined by a generation which could still afford to err, but as Greece approached her hour of destiny, her prophetic inspiration grew clearer:

The poets of the sixth century were haunted more insistently than the Homeridai by the possibilities of disaster inherent in success of every kind—in personal prosperity, in military victory, and in the social triumph of civilization. They traced the mischief to an aberration of the human spirit under the shock of sudden, unexpected attainment, and they realized that both the accumulated achievement of generations and the greater promise of the future might be lost irretrievably by failure at this critical moment. ‘Surfeit (κόρος) breeds sin (ὑβρις) when prosperity visits unbalanced minds.’ In slightly different words, the proverb recurs in the collections of verses attributed to Theognis and to Solon. Its maker refrained from adding what was in his and his hearers’ thoughts, that ὑβρις, once engendered, breeds ἄτη—the complete and certain destruction into which the sinner walks with unseeing eyes. But the whole moral mystery, to its remorseless end, was uttered again and again in passionate words by Aeschylus, who consciously discarded the primitive magical determinism in which Herodotus afterwards vainly sought relief.

Φιλεῖ δὲ τίκτειν ὑβρις  
 μὲν παλαιὰ νεά-  
 ζουσιν ἐν κακοῖς βροτῶν  
 ὑβριν τότ’ ἢ τόθ’, ὅτε τὸ κύριον μόλη  
 φάος τόκου,

δαίμονά τ' ἔταν, ἄμαχον, ἀπόλεμον,  
 ἀνίερρον θράσος, μελαί-  
 νας μελάθροισιν Ἄτας,  
 εἰδομένας τοκεῦσιν.

But Old Sin loves, when comes the hour again,  
 To bring forth New,  
 Which laugheth lusty amid the tears of men;  
 Yea, and Unruth, his comrade, wherewith none  
 May plead nor strive, which dareth on and on,  
 Knowing not fear nor any holy thing;  
 Two fires of darkness in a house, born true,  
 Like to their ancient spring.

(*Agamemnon*, vv. 763-71,  
 Murray's translation.)

The poet of the crowning victory over Persia was filled with awe, as well as exultation, at the possibilities for good or evil which his triumphant generation held in their hands. Were they true metal or base? The times would test them, but he had no doubt about the inexorable law.

Οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ἐπαλξίς  
 πλούτου πρὸς κόρον ἀνδρὶ  
 λακτίσαντι μέγαν δίκης  
 βωμὸν εἰς ἀφάνειαν.

Never shall state nor gold  
 Shelter his heart from aching  
 Whoso the Altar of Justice old  
 Spurneth to night unwaking.

(*Agamemnon*, vv. 381-4,  
 Murray's translation.)

The *Agamemnon* was written when Athens stood at the height of her glory and her power, and before her sons, following the devices of their hearts, 'like a boy chasing a wingèd bird,' had set a fatal stumbling-block in the way of their city, or smirched her with an intolerable stain. The generation of Marathon foreboded the catastrophe of the Peloponnesian War, yet the shock, when it came, was beyond their powers of imagination, and the effect of it on the mind of Greece was first expressed by the generation which was smitten by the war in early manhood. I will quote Thucydides (iii. 82):

'So the class-war at Korkyra grew more and more savage, and it made a particular impression because it was the first outbreak of an upheaval that spread in time through almost the whole of Greek society. In every state there were conflicts of class, and the leaders of the respective parties now procured the intervention of the Athenians or the Lakedaimonians on their side. In peace-time they would have had neither the opportunity nor the inclination to call in the foreigner, but now there was the war, and it was easy for any party of violence to get their opponents crushed and themselves into power by an alliance with one of the belligerents. This recrudescence of class-war brought one calamity after another upon the

states of Greece—calamities that occur and will continue to occur as long as human nature remains what it is, however they may be modified or occasionally mitigated by changes of circumstance. Under the favourable conditions of peace-time, communities and individuals do not have their hands forced by the logic of events, and can therefore act up to a higher standard. But war strips away all the margins of ordinary life and breaks in character to circumstance by its brutal training. So the states were torn by the class-war, and the sensation made by each outbreak had a sinister effect on the next—in fact, there was something like a competition in perfecting the fine art of conspiracies and atrocities. . . .

(iii. 83) 'Thus the class-war plunged Greek society into every kind of moral evil, and honesty, which is the chief constituent of idealism, was laughed out of existence in the prevailing atmosphere of hostility and suspicion. No argument was cogent enough and no pledge solemn enough to reconcile opponents. The only argument that appealed to the party momentarily in power was the unlikelihood of their remaining there long and the consequent advisability of taking no risks with their enemies. And the stupider the combatants, the greater their chances of survival, just because they were terrified at their deficiencies, expected to



be outwitted and outmanœuvred by their opponents, and therefore plunged recklessly into action, while their superiors in intellect, who trusted to their wits to protect them and disdained practical precautions, were often caught defenceless and brought to destruction.'

There you have the effect of the great Greek war upon the first generation. Thucydides, of course, had a sensitive and emotional temperament. He is always controlling himself and reining himself in. But one is struck by an outburst of the same feeling in a younger man, Xenophon, who was ordinarily in harmony with his age and was probably rather unimaginative and self-complacent by nature. The war had given Xenophon his opportunity as a soldier and a writer. He was not inclined to quarrel with the 'envious and disordering' powers that had ruined Greek civilization. But in the last paragraph of the *History of his Own Times* he is carried away, for he has just been describing the battle of Mantinea (362 B.C.), in which he had lost his son.

'The result of the battle', he writes, 'disappointed every one's expectations. Almost the whole of Greece had mobilized on one side or the other, and it was taken for granted that if it came to an action, the victors would be able to do what they liked and the vanquished would be at their

mercy. But Providence so disposed it that both sides . . . claimed the victory and yet neither had gained a foot of territory, a single city or a particle of power beyond what they had possessed before the battle. On the contrary, there was more unsettlement and disorder (*ταραχή*) in Greece after the battle than before it. But I do not propose to carry my narrative further and will leave the sequel to any other historian who cares to record it.' (*Hellenica*, vii. 5 fin.).

I must refrain from quoting Plato, but I would recommend you, while studying his metaphysics for your philosophy, to note his moods and emotions for the light they throw upon the history of his lifetime. Plato's long life—428 to 347 B.C.—practically coincided with the first phase of the second act of the tragedy—the series of wars that began in 431 B.C., and that had reduced the Greek city-states to complete disunion and exhaustion by 355. Plato belonged to the cultured governing class which was hit hardest by these first disasters. At the age of twenty-nine, after witnessing the downfall of Athens, he had to witness the judicial murder of Sokrates—the greatest man of the older generation, who had been appreciated and loved by Plato and his friends. Plato's own most promising pupil, whom he had marked out for his successor, was killed in action in a particularly

aimless recrudescence of the war. Plato's political disillusionment and perversity are easy to understand. But it is curious and interesting to watch the clash between his political bitterness and his intellectual serenity. In the intellectual and artistic sphere—as a writer, musician, mathematician, metaphysician—he stood consciously at the zenith of Greek history; but whenever he turned to politics he seems to have felt that the spring had gone out of the year. He instinctively antedated the setting of his dialogues. The characters nearly all belong to the generation of Sokrates, which had grown to manhood before the war and whose memories conjured up the glory that the war had extinguished. Note his ‘other-worldliness’, for it is a feature that comes into Greek civilization with him and gradually permeates it. He turns from science to theology, from the world of time and change to the world of archetypes or ideas. He turns from the social religion of the city-state to a personal religion for which he takes symbols from primitive mythology. He turns from politics to utopias. But Plato only lived to see the first phase of the catastrophe. As we watch the remainder of this second act—those four terrible centuries that followed the year 431 B.C.—there come tidings of calamity after calamity, like the messages of disaster in the Book

of Job, and as the world crumbles, people tend more and more to lay up their treasure elsewhere. In the *Laws*, Plato places his utopia no farther away than Crete. Two centuries later the followers of Aristonikos the Bolshevik, outlawed by the cities of Greece and Asia, proclaim themselves citizens of the City of the Sun. Two centuries later still, the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, despairing of this world, pray for its destruction by fire to make way for the Kingdom of Heaven.

Plato's state of mind gives you the atmosphere of the first phase after the catastrophe. For the second phase—the conquest of the East and the struggle for the spoils—I will refer you to Mr. Edwyn Bevan's *Lectures on the Stoics and Sceptics* and to Professor Gilbert Murray's Conway Memorial lecture on *The Stoic Philosophy*. They show you a system of philosophy which is no longer a pure product of speculation but is primarily a moral shelter erected hastily to meet the storms of life. For the third phase—the rally of civilization in the middle of the third century B.C.—I will simply refer you to Plutarch's lives of the Spartan kings Agis and Kleomenes, and if you read them I think you will feel the gallantry of this rally and the pathos of its failure. And then comes the fourth phase—the Roman wars against the other great powers of the Medi-

terranean world. The Hannibalic war in Italy was, I should imagine, the most terrible war that there has ever been, not excepting the recent war in Europe. The horror of that war haunted later generations, and its mere memory made oblivion seem a desirable release from an intolerable world.

*Nil igitur mors est nobis neque pertinet hilum,  
quandoquidem natura animi mortalis habetur.  
et velut anteacto nil tempore sensimus aegri,  
ad conflagrandum venientibus undique Poenis,  
omnia cum belli trepido concussa tumultu  
horrida contremuere sub altis aetheris oris,  
in dubioque fuere utrorum ad regna cadendum  
omnibus humanis esset terraque marique,  
sic, ubi non erimus, cum corporis atque animai  
discidium fuerit quibus e sumus uniter apti,  
scilicet haud nobis quicquam, qui non erimus tum,  
accidere omnino poterit sensumque movere,  
non si terra mari miscebitur et mare caelo.*

I suppose I must try to translate that. It is of course a passage of Lucretius (iii. 830-842) which follows upon an elaborate argument to prove that death destroys personality and that the soul is not immortal.

‘So death is nothing to us and matters nothing to us, since we have proved that the soul is not immortal. And as in time past we felt no ill, when the Phoenicians were pouring in to battle on every front, when the world rocked with the shock

and tumult of war and shivered from centre to firmament, when all mankind on sea and land must fall under the victor's empire and victory was in doubt—so, when we have ceased to exist, when body and soul, whose union is our being, have been parted, then nothing can touch us—we shall have ceased to exist—and nothing can make us feel, no, not if earth is confounded with sea and sea with heaven.'

Lucretius wrote that about a hundred and fifty years after Hannibal evacuated Italy, but the horror is still vivid in his mind, and his poetry arouses it in our minds as we listen. Personally, I remember how those lines kept running in my head about this time two years ago.

But the victors suffered with the vanquished in the common ruin of civilization. The whole Mediterranean world, and the devastated area in Italy most of all, was shaken by the economic and social revolutions which the Roman wars brought in their train. The proletariat was oppressed to such a degree that the unity of society was permanently destroyed and Greek civilization, after being threatened with a violent extinction by Bolshevik outbreaks—the slave wars in Sicily, the insurrection of Aristonikos and the massacres of Mithradates in Anatolia, the outbreaks of Spartakos and Catilina in Italy—was eventually sup-

planted by a rival civilization of the proletariat—the Christian Church. The revolutionary last phase in the second act—the final phase before the foundation of the Empire—has left its expression in the cry of the Son of Man: ‘The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head.’ It was one of those anonymous phrases that are in all men’s mouths because they express what is in all men’s hearts. Tiberius Gracchus used it in his public speeches at Rome; two centuries later it reappears in the discourses of Jesus of Nazareth.

Ergo inter sese paribus concurrere telis  
 Romanas acies iterum videre Philippi,  
 nec fuit indignum superis his sanguine nostro  
 Emathiam et latos Haemi pinguescere campos . . .  
 Di patrii, Indigetes, et Romule, Vestaque mater  
 quae Tuscum Tiberim et Romana Palatia servas,  
 hunc saltem everso iuvenem succurrere saeclo  
 ne prohibete. satis iam pridem sanguine nostro  
 Laomedontae luimus periuria Troiae . . .  
 vicinae ruptis inter se legibus urbes  
 arma ferunt; saevit toto Mars impius orbe;  
 ut cum carceribus sese effudere quadrigae,  
 addunt in spatio, et frustra retinacula tendens  
 fertur equis auriga neque audit currus habenas.  
 (*Georgics*, i. 489 seqq.)

‘Therefore Philippi saw Roman armies turn their swords against each other a second time in battle, and the gods felt no pity that Emathia

and the broad plains of Haemus should twice be fattened with our blood. . . .

‘ Gods of our fathers, gods of our country, god of our city, goddess of our hearths who watchest over Tuscan Tiber and Roman Palatine, suffer this last saviour to succour our fallen generation. Our blood has flowed too long. We have paid in full for the sins of our forefathers—the broken faith of ancient Troy. . . .

‘ The bonds are broken between neighbour cities and they meet in arms. Ungodly war rages the world over. The chariots launched on the race gather speed as they go ; the driver vainly draws the reins ; the steeds carry him away, and the team will not answer to the bridle. ’

It is a prayer for the lifting of the curse, and this time the ‘ envious and disordering ’ powers gave ear. The charioteer regained control, and we are carried on to the third act of the tragedy, in which, to my mind, no small part of its beauty and a very great part of its significance is to be found. The imperial peace could not save the body of Greek civilization—the four centuries of war had inflicted mortal wounds ; but I am not sure that it did not save its soul. Although Augustus had not the abilities of Caesar, he felt and pitied the sorrows of the world, and he succeeded in expressing the pity and repentance, the



ruthfulness for and piety towards the past, which were astir in the spirits of his generation. But I cannot find a phrase to characterize the Empire. The words 'Decline and Fall' suggest themselves, but how should they be applied? Gibbon took the second century of the Empire, the age of the Antonines, as the Golden Age of the Ancient World, and traced the decline and fall of the Empire from the death of Marcus Aurelius. On the other hand, if my reading of the plot is right, the fatal catastrophe occurred six centuries earlier, in the year 431 B. C., and the Empire itself was the decline and fall of Greek civilization. But was it only that? One is apt to think so when one reads the diary of Marcus Aurelius, and pictures him in his quarters at Carnuntum, fighting finely but hopelessly on two fronts—against the barbarians on the Danube and the sadness in his own soul.

'Human life! Its duration is momentary, its substance in perpetual flux, its senses dim, its physical organism perishable, its consciousness a vortex, its destiny dark, its repute uncertain—in fact, the material element is a rolling stream, the spiritual element dreams and vapour, life a war and a sojourning in a far country, fame oblivion. What can see us through? One thing and one only—philosophy, and that means keeping the

spirit within us unspoiled and undishonoured, not giving way to pleasure or pain, never acting unthinkingly or deceitfully or insincerely, and never being dependent on the moral support of others. It also means taking what comes contentedly as all part of the process to which we owe our own being; and, above all, it means facing death calmly—taking it simply as a dissolution of the atoms of which every living organism is composed. Their perpetual transformation does not hurt the atoms, so why should one mind the whole organism being transformed and dissolved? It is a law of nature, and natural law can never be wrong.’ (*Μάρκος Ἀντωνῖνος εἰς ἑαυτόν*, ii fin.)

But having quoted you Marcus Aurelius, the first citizen of the Empire, I am bound to add a quotation from Paul of Tarsos, a citizen who has as good a claim as any other to be heard:

“How are the dead raised up? With what body do they come?” Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die. . . . It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.’ . . .

It startles us to be reminded that these two actors appeared on the stage in the same act of the drama, and that Paul actually played his part a century before Marcus played his. Paul’s voice

suggests not only a younger generation but quite a different play. His thought in the lines I have quoted is inspired by a predecessor whom Marcus regarded as one of the innumerable prophets of the proletariat. 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone, but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.' The saying was included in the miscellaneous traditions about Jesus of Nazareth which were passing from mouth to mouth among the illiterate masses, but which had not begun to excite the curiosity of the educated classes in Marcus' day. What would the scholar have made of it if a collection of these traditions had fallen under his eye, scrawled on bad paper in barbarous Greek? Little enough, for he would have missed the whole background of his own sentiment and thought, which was nothing less than the background of Greek civilization. Great literary memories crowd the brief passage of his diary which I have quoted above—Epiktetos and Lucretius and the Stoa, Plato and Sokrates, Demokritos and the Hippokratean school of medicine from which I took my first quotation, and simpler minds and more primitive artists in the dim generations behind. We are carried right back through the tragedy at which we have been looking on. The two men are worlds apart, in spite of the fact that their propositions, when we

strip them naked, are much the same. 'The organism is transformed and dissolved.'—'That which thou sowest is not quickened except it die.' They are both representing death as a phase in the process of nature, but it is not till we grasp the similarity of the thought that we fully realize the difference in the outlook and the emotion.

Under the smooth surface of the Empire there was a great gulf fixed between the 'bourgeois' society of the city-states and the descendants of the slaves imported during the Roman Wars; but the Empire, by gradually alleviating the material condition of the proletariat, insensibly affected their point of view. The development of their religion—the one inalienable possession carried by the slaves from their Oriental homes—is an index of the psychological change. In the last phase of the Second Act, the 'Red Guards' of Sicily and Anatolia had been led by prophets and preachers of their Oriental gods. Their religion had lent itself to their revolutionary state of mind. But under the Empire, as descendants of the plantation-slaves succeeded in purchasing their freedom and forming a new class of shopkeepers and clerks, their religion correspondingly reflected their rise in the world. They remained indifferent, if not hostile, to the Imperial Hellenic tradition, but they began to aspire to a

kingdom of their own in this world as well as in the next. The force which had broken out desperately in the crazy wonder-working of Eunous of Enna and had then inspired the 'other-worldly' exaltation of Paul of Tarsos, was soon conducted into the walls of chapels, and the local associations of Christian chapel-goers were steadily linked up into a federation so powerfully organized that the Imperial federation of city-states had eventually to choose between going into partnership with it or being supplanted. Thus the empire of which Marcus and Paul were citizens was more than the third act in the tragedy of Ancient Greece. While it retarded the inevitable dissolution of one civilization it conceived its successor, and when, after Marcus' death, imperial statesmanship failed, and the ancient organism long preserved by its skill at last broke down, the shock did not extinguish new and old together, but brought the new life to birth. By the seventh century after Christ, when Ancient Greek civilization may be said finally to have dissolved, our own civilization was ready to 'shoot up and thrive' and repeat the tragedy of mankind.

I can best express my personal feeling about the Empire in a parable. It was like the sea round whose shores its network of city-states was strung. The Mediterranean seems at first sight

a poor substitute for the rivers that have given their waters to make it. Those were living waters, whether they ran muddy or clear; the sea seems just salt and still and dead. But as soon as we study the sea, we find movement and life there also. There are silent currents circulating perpetually from one part to another, and the surface-water that seems to be lost by evaporation is not really lost, but will descend in distant places and seasons, with its bitterness all distilled away, as life-giving rain. And as these surface-waters are drawn off into the clouds, their place is taken by lower layers continually rising from the depths. The sea itself is in constant and creative motion, but the influence of this great body of water extends far beyond its shores. One finds it softening the extremes of temperature, quickening the vegetation, and prospering the life of animals and men, in the distant heart of continents and among peoples that have never heard its name.











